

The Washington Post

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The GOP and the budget boilerplate gap

By [Michael Gerson](#), Published: March 14

It would be a mistake to confuse a budget proposal for a proposed budget, though they bear a superficial resemblance. A budget proposal — of the type that [Rep. Paul Ryan \(R-Wis.\)](#) and [Sen. Patty Murray \(D-Wash.\)](#) have recently announced — represents the internal agreement reached by a party caucus and the starting point of a high-stakes political negotiation. If a Republican or Democratic budget expert were to craft an actual proposed budget — one that would deserve a vote and could secure a majority in both chambers — it would look very different.

Ryan's budget proposal is similar to his previous two in both strengths and failures. It deserves everlasting fiduciary fame for proposing a plausible Medicare reform plan, essential to the future of the program and the long-term stability of the federal budget.

And yet . . . the refusal to consider additional revenue and the delayed implementation of proposed Medicare reform result in impossible reductions in Medicaid and discretionary spending. These elements of the budget proposal summarize the ideological predispositions of House Republicans rather than address objective economic needs, humanitarian requirements or even GOP political imperatives.

Congressional Democrats, in turn, have emerged from nearly four years of budgetary silence with their own ideological caricature — a proposal combining heavy taxes, budgetary gimmicks, a net increase in spending and a strident refusal to consider meaningful entitlement reform. The silence was more responsible.

Neither budget proposal is worth criticizing in too much detail. How do you chemically analyze a gesture? But the broad contrast in approaches is instructive. The Republican argument: Given demographic and fiscal trends, if you want to provide income and health-insurance support to the elderly and poor, and preserve a meaningful American role in the world, government will need to become less of an all-purpose service provider and to refocus key programs, such as Medicare, on helping those in the greatest need. The Democratic argument: We can do it all — as long as you don't look beyond the 10-year budget window.

Republicans get the better of this disagreement. But the tensions within the Ryan budget proposal are also revealing. Assuming the process went normally, Ryan and his team wrote the language of the budget document, "[The Path to Prosperity](#)," which isn't voted on, while the leadership and relevant committee members had to agree on the substance — the budget tables that members actually approve. In some areas, this produced a strange disconnect between aspiration and policy.

So, for example, the document talks of replacing Obamacare with market-oriented, consumer-driven health-care reform. But there is no Obamacare replacement in the actual budget.

The most obvious gap is on domestic policy. "Above all," the document states, "the role of policymakers must be to lift government-imposed barriers to stronger communities and flourishing lives. Fiscal responsibility and economic opportunity are but means to a more critical end: the rebuilding of broken communities and the empowerment of families and citizens."

This is an important recognition, as far as it goes. But the relevant policy — such as reinstituting work requirements in welfare and increasing state flexibility in Medicaid — hardly constitutes a compelling empowerment agenda. Part of the problem is that conservatives tend to view civil society as an alternative to government and the role of government as uniformly negative in displacing families and communities. But government — through the tax code, vouchers and grants — can also strengthen families and communities. And even when government has helped weaken and displace civil society, the retreat of the state does not

automatically result in the reconstitution of families and communities.

A smaller government requires a bigger society. But a smaller government does not automatically result in a bigger society. This points to a catalytic role for government — the active empowerment of individuals, families, charities and communities. But there is little of this in the Ryan budget, and not much outside it. Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) has introduced a bill to incentivize private donations to school-choice programs. Sen. Rob Portman (R-Ohio) has pushed efforts to help ex-prisoners reenter communities. But there isn't much virtuous competition going on among GOP legislators on empowerment issues.

A serious budget, of course, lies somewhere in the vast gap between the Ryan and Murray budget proposals. And much about the Republican future will depend on taking the part of the budget document that many conservatives regard as boilerplate and turning it into a governing agenda, demonstrating a concern for the common good.

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